#### Introduction

### Guidelines

Guidelines have a role that is different in nature from the precise regulations found in zoning and building codes. Guidelines do not always dictate specific limits, nor does strict adherence to them necessarily assure approval. Evaluation of buildings requires judgement in studying plans submitted. The Vieux Carré Commission (VCC) has to consider each design on its own merit, as well as its effect on its neighbors and the Vieux Carré as a whole. By themselves, guidelines do not guarantee excellent or even mediocre architecture. The important point is that by following these guidelines, the property owner, the residents, the VCC, and the City Council are doing their part to help protect the fragile, irreplaceable environment of this National Landmark historic District.

These guidelines are not designed to promote any particular architectural styles. Their role is to protect existing Vieux Carré buildings against incorrect alterations and, as new buildings are built and additions made to existing structures, to preserve the historic continuity and architectural unity of the district. Within the overall unity today are a wide variety of styles and settings, and, as a result, many different new buildings could be compatible. Some buildings, however, may not be. For that reason, the intent of the guidelines is to be selective and sometimes restrictive in order to exclude designs that would erode the historic, cultural, and economic resource built up over generations in the Vieux Carré.

By definition, guidelines provide policy or procedures for an action. While these guidelines were and are created specifically for the Vieux Carré, national guidelines and preservation practices are also applicable. The generality of The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring, & Reconstructing Historic Buildings provides a base for the more specific Vieux Carré Commission's design guidelines. The national standards for the treatments of historic properties are included at the end of these design guidelines for reference.

# **Historic Continuity**

The historic value of the Vieux Carré is found in the design of its individual buildings, the street scene, an the overall relationship of buildings, streets, topography, and water. The architecture and the street scene are a reflection of a society, economy, and technology very different from today's. The French Quarter evolved in a simpler, more structured society and before the widespread availability of electricity, large machinery, easy transportation, low cost steel and glass, and elevators. Today, in spite of the enormous changes in society and technology, this urban pattern still creates an exceptional, workable, city district.

The general appearance of street vistas and the present character of separate buildings represent an accumulation of several periods. The overall pattern of streets, lots, buildings, and landmarks was established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and followed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The three centuries of living and building are what have created the "distinctive character" of the Vieux Carré.

This distinctive character has survived through three 20<sup>th</sup> Century periods: 1) long years of stagnation and neglect that prevented disruptive changes; 2) an early revival movement by writers, artists, and the infiltration of diverse Uptown and out of town immigrants into a genuine old world culture; and 3) new successful undertakings that counteracted neglect and enlivened the laggard downtown economy. As new growth alerted the world to the charms of the Vieux Carré, controls are necessary so that large scale projects and grand schemes will not erode the very charms that underlay the Quarter's popular success. Today, more than ever, caution and vigilance remain essential to the continued preservation of the Vieux Carré.

### **Distinctive Characteristics**

Anything as subtle as charm is difficult to define, and the quaint and distinctive character of the Vieux Carré defies exact definition as well. The best way to define these characteristics may be through the words of the many travelers who visited the area from Benjamin Henry Latrobe, to Frederick Law Olmsted, Harriet Martineau and Mrs. Trollope. Norman's and Hearn's Guidebooks in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Nathaniel Cortland Curtis and Lyle Saxon in the 20<sup>th</sup> century also describe the area's distinctive characteristics.

Curtis wrote that the features of a city are its houses, its streets and its open spaces. These component parts of the Vieux Carré interrelate in a subtle and distinctive way: the repetition and similarity of house after house with similar or special architectural details and seldom of greater height than four stories; small houses on small lots facing narrow streets, with open space at the interior of the lots, the latter the result of the exclusiveness of European early settlers. These elements have produced the ambiance of the Vieux Carré for leisurely living dictated by the climate and have given it its quaint and distinctive charm found nowhere else in America.

The area speaks of communal intimacy, and yet it also proclaims almost sacrosanct individual privacy. To the front, the streets and banquettes are shared by the community.

### Tout Ensemble

The courts have not attempted to define these special qualities but rather have looked at the Vieux Carré as a total concept and have adhered to Chief Justice O'Niell's "tout ensemble" (198 La. 852,5 So. 2d-1941), or overall unity, as a definitive statement. The courts have tracked the City ordinance which created the Commission very closely in their decisions and use the phraseology "quaint and distinctive" in every instance.

This legislative wording, general rather than categorical, seems to take into account that, within the overall entity of the Vieux Carré, there is a broad spread of historic styles, cultural influence, land use, and density especially in comparison with the relative fixity of the first Savannah district, for example, or the staid classicism of Williamsburg. However general this phraseology, its thrust and intention are unmistakable. The carefully compiled principles and regulatory details of these guidelines, based on over fifty years of experience by the Vieux Carré Commission, are to be taken as valid and tested.

# **Design Quality**

While the quality of a building's design may not improve with age, every generation must evaluate the significance of architectural styles and examples, being guided by the wisdom of the past and wary of its folly. Many interesting shotgun cottages and Eastlake buildings of the Quarter were considered to have very little value in 1936. During the 1960's when value ratings were assigned to the buildings of the Quarter, most of these were given low ratings. Even today the attitudes towards the significance of historic warehouse style buildings is evolving. The last overall review of significance ratings in the Vieux Carré was completed in 1988.